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SEAN KELLY/PENTAGON

NATO: ISSUES FACING THE ALLIANCE

ANNCR:

WHEN NATO MINISTERS MEET IN BRUSSELS THIS WEEK (DEFENSE MINISTERS DEC. 5-6; FOREIGN MINISTERS DEC. 7-8), THEY WILL BE DISCUSSING A NUMBER OF KEY ISSUES FACING THE ALLIANCE. SOME WILL BE ON THE AGENDA, OTHERS WILL NOT. PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT SEAN KELLY HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT:

VOICE:

ONE OF THE MOST ATTENTION-GETTING ITEMS ON THE NATO AGENDA WILL BE AWACS -- THE U.S.-BUILT FLYING RADAR STATION THAT THE ALLIANCE IS PLANNING TO PURCHASE AND OPERATE AS A NATO-OWNED MILITARY SYSTEM. THE NEGOTIATIONS OVER AWACS (WHICH STANDS FOR AIRBORNE WARNING AND CONTROL SYSTEM) HAVE BEEN GOING ON FOR YEARS; THEY ARE COMPLICATED BY COST-SHARING FACTORS INVOLVING THIRTEEN DIFFERENT NATIONS.

AND THE COSTS ARE NOT INCONSIDERABLE. AWACS IS A BOEING SEVEN-OH-SEVEN AIRLINER CRAMMED FULL OF RADAR AND OTHER ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT DESIGNED TO PROVIDE EARLY WARNING AND AIRBORNE COMMAND FACILITIES. IN EFFECT, AWACS IS BOTH A FLYING RADAR STATION AND COMMAND POST. EACH AIRCRAFT WILL COST OVER ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY MILLION DOLLARS -- MAKING IT EASILY THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE AIRPLANE.

OFFICIALS HERE AT THE PENTAGON HOPE THAT THIS NATO DEFENSE MINISTERS MEETING IN BRUSSELS WILL COMPLETE THE FINAL DETAILS ON THE AWACS PURCHASE, SO THAT THE MEETING OF FOREIGN MINISTERS CAN AGREE ON THE CREATION OF A NATO AGENCY TO HANDLE THE PURCHASING DETAILS. WITH ANY LUCK, THE FIRST OF EIGHTEEN NATO AWACS AIRCRAFT SHOULD BE ARRIVING IN EUROPE WITHIN THREE YEARS.

BUT THERE COULD BE FURTHER SNAGS. A LOT OF MONEY IS INVOLVED, AND NATO IS NOT USED TO COPING WITH ALLIANCE-WIDE CONCEPTS. FREQUENTLY IN THE PAST, THE ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF FUNCTIONING AS A COLLECTION OF FIFTEEN SEPARATE NATIONAL ENTITIES LINKED BY NOT MUCH MORE THAN THE COMMON GOAL OF SELF-DEFENSE. THUS THE AWACS PURCHASE IS SEEN HERE AS AN IMPORTANT STEP TOWARDS COMMONALITY WITHIN THE ALLIANCE.

U.S. OFFICIALS WILL ALSO BE LOOKING FORWARD TO A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATO LONG-TERM DEFENSE PROGRAM. ADOPTED AT THE ALLIANCE SUMMIT MEETING, HERE IN WASHINGTON LAST MAY, THE PROGRAM IS AN EFFORT TO PROVIDE NATO WITH A COMMON BLUEPRINT FOR MILITARY PLANNING OVER THE NEXT FIFTEEN YEARS. ALSO AT THE NATO SUMMIT MEETING, ALLIED LEADERS AGREED TO ADJUST THEIR DEFENSE BUDGETS TO ALLOW FOR A THREE PERCENT ANNUAL INCREASE TAKING INFLATION INTO ACCOUNT. RECENTLY, THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS THAT THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION MAY BE RECONSIDERING THIS COMMITMENT EUROPEAN OFFICIALS ARE EXPECTED TO RAISE THE DEFENSE BUDGET ISSUE, AND THE THREE PERCENT INCREASE, AT THIS WEEK'S NATO MEETINGS IN BRUSSELS.

FINALLY, THE WHOLE QUESTION OF THE CURRENT MILITARY BALANCE BETWEEN NATO AND THE WARSAW PACT WILL BE EXPLORED BY BOTH THE DEFENSE MINISTERS AND THE FOREIGN MINISTERS. THAT'S A TRADITIONAL TOPIC ON THE ALLIANCE AGENDA, BUT AT THIS WEEK'S NATO MEETING THERE IS BOUND TO BE SOME DISCUSSION ABOUT ROMANIA'S APPARENT UNWILLINGNESS TO COMMIT ITSELF TO HIGHER MILITARY SPENDING AS A MEMBER OF THE WARSAW PACT.

(OPT) NATO MINISTERS HAVE COME TO EXPECT ARGUMENTS OVER SPENDING WITHIN THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE. THE WARSAW PACT, WHICH HAS ITS HEADQUARTERS IN MOSCOW AND IS RUN BY A SOVIET GENERAL, DOES NOT NORMALLY PRODUCE SUCH DISCUSSIONS -- AT LEAST NOT IN PUBLIC. (END OPT)

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